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*Russian judges wrap up week in Maryland The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD) August 4, 2001
Saturday*

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August 4, 2001 Saturday

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HEADLINE: Russian judges wrap up week in Maryland

BYLINE: Earl Kelly

BODY:

A delegation of eight Russian trial judges ended a weeklong stay in Maryland on Friday by participating with journalists in a discussion of bench-media relations.

When asked whether it was true, as the media have reported, that Russian journalists are being attacked by government agencies and organized crime figures, the judges said that some journalists have been murdered.

But when asked if reports are true that judges are subjected to political pressures and intimidation, the otherwise sedate group grew animated and denied the allegation.

"I am happy not to have anything like that in my career," Judge Anna Vasilyevna Peregudova, from the Altai region near Siberia, said through an interpreter. "When the Communists were in power, no one ever called and tried to influence me, and I'm not getting calls now.

"But sometimes we are faced with the reality we have to get [funding] from our local government. The local administrative head will not tell us what to do " but [sometimes] we see he or she is not happy."

Another judge said, "I always make my decisions in accordance with the law, not in response to a phone call." A third said, "The law is supreme and we are a society of laws."

All Russian trial judges serve on the "Rayon" or federal court, the judges said, and are appointed by President Vladimir Putin by decree, not with the advice and consent of the legislature.

Judicial candidates are recommended to Putin by a conference of judges that is elected by the incumbent judges. Appointees serve for three-year terms and then are either reappointed for life or cease being judges.

Disguise and defamation

Court proceedings are generally open to reporters, the judges said, but the presiding judge or a party may close the trial and eject the reporter.

When reporters write about civil and criminal cases, the judges said, they disguise the parties so that readers cannot identify them.

The judges expressed surprise that American journalists rarely get sued for libel and said that suits against Russian journalists are commonplace, with plaintiffs seeking "moral damages" and a retraction.

The delegation was in the United States as part of the Library of Congress' Russian Leadership Program 2001. Other groups went to observe federal courts in Oklahoma and Illinois, said Court of Appeals Judge **Alan M. Wilner**, who helped organize the Maryland visit.

Wilner, who has worked closely with the Russian Leadership Program and with programs sponsored by the American Bar Association, said this was the sixth delegation of Russian judges to visit Maryland courts.

Russia started using jury trials only since the Soviet Union collapsed, and on Tuesday the group observed a jury trial in Baltimore County Circuit Court.


Judge Dana Mark Levitz, who presided over the case, said the one-day trial on charges of stalking and telephone misuse was "perfect" for training purposes and included every step of the process from jury selection to verdict.

Levitz threw out the stalking count at the end of the state's case after the chief witness testified she was able to see the defendant at 2:30 a.m. even though there were no street lights in the area but the sun was coming up. The jury acquitted the defendant on the telephone charge after deliberating about seven minutes.

Levitz said the trial fascinated the visiting jurors when an audience member began yelling at the defendant and had to be removed from the courtroom.

-- Reporter Earl Kelly participated in the panel discussion as a media representative.

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